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October 2, 2018

The Honorable Alex M. Azar, II  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
330 C Street SW  
Washington, D.C. 20416

Dear Secretary Azar:

I write to inquire about recent reports that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is moving hundreds of children to Tornillo, Texas under the cover of darkness. The New York Times reported on September 30, 2018 that children are being moved in the middle of the night from foster homes and other shelters to live in tents in the West Texas desert.<sup>1</sup> I inspected the Tornillo tent camps in June and can attest that it is no place for a child to live.

At the height of the family separation crisis, reports indicated that the shelter would remain open until August. HHS has renewed the Tornillo contract twice and it is now expected to remain open through the end of the year. Compounding the contract renewals, HHS has expanded the capacity of the shelter from a few hundred beds to 3,800.<sup>2</sup> This expansion occurred despite the fact that the Tornillo shelter is unregulated by the state and does not provide the same protections for migrant children as a standard Office of Refugee Resettlement facility does.<sup>3</sup>

I would be remiss not to mention the role the Department of Homeland Security has played in this crisis. A memo shows that Secretary Nielsen knowingly approved the family separation policy that led the government to rip children away from their loved ones at the border.<sup>4</sup> While several factors have caused the number of unaccompanied migrant children to increase, it is clear that this zero humanity policy is at the center of it.

In light of these concerning reports, please answer the following in writing by October 9, 2018:

1. How many children in the Tornillo shelter were separated from their families at the border as a result of the family separation policy?
2. Does the government have plans to open other temporary shelters to house unaccompanied minors? If so, when and where will the shelters open?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/30/us/migrant-children-tent-city-texas.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/09/11/federal-government-greatly-expand-tornillo-shelter-unaccompanied-minor/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/children-entering-the-united-states-unaccompanied-section-1#1.7>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/immigration-homeland-security-family-separation-foia-dhs>

3. Because temporary shelters are unregulated, what are you doing to ensure protections for children?
4. What kind of access do these children have to legal representatives?
5. How long will the Tornillo shelter remain open?
6. Have any children died or been seriously injured at Tornillo?
7. How many of the children in Tornillo are in the process of being released to a sponsor?
8. How many children in Tornillo seek asylum?
9. What is the average stay at Tornillo?
10. Do the Tornillo employees go through a background check? Are they fingerprinted?  
What kind of training do they receive?

I continue to be concerned about the wellbeing of all migrant children in custody. I implore you to release these children to sponsors as soon as possible. Studies show that these shelters cause children stress, prolonged illness, and can lead to long-lasting mental and physical consequences.<sup>5</sup> It is up to the government to ensure the safety of these children.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Joaquin Castro  
Member of Congress

CC: Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, Department of Homeland Security

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/06/20/code-red/fatal-consequences-dangerously-substandard-medical-care-immigration> ; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/health/migrant-children-mental-health.html> ; <https://www.acponline.org/acp-newsroom/acp-objects-to-separation-of-children-from-their-parents-at-border> ; <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/apa-statement-opposing-separation-of-children-from-parents-at-the-border>